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## Fact Sheet #1

# Health Information on Asbestos

- Asbestos is classified as a known human carcinogen by State, federal, and international agencies. It was identified by the Air Resources Board (ARB) as a toxic air contaminant in 1986.
- Asbestos minerals belong to either the serpentine mineral group or the amphibole mineral group. The most common type of asbestos found in California is chrysotile, a serpentine mineral; other types include tremolite asbestos and actinolite asbestos which are amphibole minerals. State and federal health officials consider all types of asbestos to be hazardous. No safe asbestos exposure level has been established for residential areas.
- The risk of disease depends upon the intensity and duration of exposure. Exposure to low levels of asbestos for short periods of time poses minimal risk. Asbestos fibers can penetrate body tissues and remain in the lungs and the tissue lining the lungs and abdominal cavity. The fibers that remain in the body are thought to be responsible for asbestos-related diseases. The illnesses caused by asbestos may not be observed for twenty or more years.
- The most common serious diseases caused by asbestos are listed below:
  - Asbestosis:** Asbestosis is a non-cancerous lung disease related to diffuse fibrous scarring of the lungs. This disease has occurred in people heavily exposed to asbestos in the workplace and in household contacts of asbestos workers. Asbestosis can cause progressive shortness of breath and coughing.
  - Lung cancer:** Lung cancer is a relatively common form of cancer which has been linked to smoking and a variety of occupational exposures. Cigarette smoking significantly increases the risk of lung cancer for those people exposed to asbestos.
  - Mesothelioma:** Mesothelioma is a rare cancer of the thin membranes lining the lungs, chest, and abdominal cavity. Almost all cases are linked to prior occupational asbestos exposure.
- Most of the information on health effects comes from studies of people who were regularly exposed to high levels of asbestos in the workplace. Workplace exposures are higher and much more likely to cause disease than non-workplace exposures.
- Questions regarding health effects should be directed to your local air pollution control district, Mr. Jim Behrmann of the ARB staff at (916) 322-8278, or Dr. Melanie Marty of the Office of Environmental Health

Hazard Assessment at (510) 622-3154.

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